

From Syria to Gaza

DAN GLAZEBROOK

WITH over 100 reported killed by Israeli airstrikes, and a further 700 injured, the attack on Gaza is already starting to resemble the 2008-9 'Operation Cast Lead' massacre. Israeli politicians have again trotted out the usual Zionist crowd-pleasers about the need to "bomb Gaza back to the Middle Ages" (Deputy Prime Minister Eli Yishai) and "flatten all of Gaza" (Ariel Sharon's son Gilad). Yet the regional situation today is very different to what it was back then. In 2009, the 'resistance axis' of Iran, Syria, Hezbollah and Hamas was strong, and Iran took concrete steps to provide military supplies to Hamas at a time when the best most other states had to offer was impotent and generally hypocritical 'condemnation'. As intelligence analysts Stratfor have noted, where "the rest of the region largely avoided direct involvement...Iran was the exception. While the Arab regimes ostracized Hamas, Iran worked to sustain the group in its fight." The report elaborates: "In early January 2009, in the midst of Operation Cast Lead, Israel learned that Iran was allegedly planning to deliver 120 tons of arms and explosives to Gaza, including anti-tank guided missiles and Iranian-made Fajr-3 rockets with a 40-kilometer (25-mile) range and 45-kilogram (99-pound) warhead...The long-range Fajr rocket attacks targeting Tel Aviv and Jerusalem in the current conflict are a testament to Iran's continued effort."

Despite having distanced themselves from the 'resistance axis' recently, moving their headquarters out of Damascus and voicing support for the anti-government militias in Syria, Hamas continue to rely on Iranian weapons as their most effective response to Israeli aggression. Indeed, it is precisely these Iranian weapons the Fajr-5 missiles that are causing such unprecedented disruptions in Israel, having reached the suburbs of Tel Aviv and forcing the city's residents into bomb shelters for the first time since 1991. Israelis are not used to their military operations having such a direct impact on their own lives, and it is this aspect of the conflict that has led to, in what is surely a first for Israel, overwhelming



Israeli opposition to a ground invasion of Gaza, with less than a third supporting such a move.

Nevertheless, the Palestinians, whilst well-equipped, are in some ways more isolated than ever. Whilst on the face of it, the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood across the region in the wake of the 'Arab Spring' should have been good news for Hamas who are, after all, an offshoot of the Brotherhood themselves the seeming descent of the Arab Spring into a sectarian conflict directed against the region's Shia Muslims has actually served to disempower Hamas' allies, and thus leave Gaza more vulnerable to precisely the attack it is now enduring. More specifically, the ongoing destruction of Syria under the onslaught of armed gangs trained and

sponsored by the West and its allies, has crippled a key Palestinian ally, and thus encouraged Israel to believe it can attack with impunity. As Hezbollah leader Nasrallah ("the smartest guy in the Middle East", according to former US deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage) noted in a speech last week, "Israel is taking advantage of the turmoil in Syria in its onslaught against Gaza. Today's aggression is happening in a different context from 2008. In 2008, the Resistance Axis was more capable of extending support to Gaza and the resistance there and this was the case before 2008 and after 2008 and we can see the results of this on the ground today. One of the supply lines to Gaza has now been cut and that is Syria. It can no longer provide

logistical support, although it can still take a political stand. Israel is taking advantage of the fighting in Syria, of the reversal of priorities, of the transformation of enemies into friends and friends into enemies. It sees this as a good opportunity to restore its deterrence and to strike at missile capabilities in Gaza, which Israel is aware will be hard to replace in light of the situation in Syria." Indeed, with the sectarian attacks taking place in Syria spilling over into Lebanon, Hezbollah itself is similarly in little position to lend the type of support to Gaza that it did in 2006, for example, by opening a second front in response to Israeli shelling of Palestinians. Stratfor again: "Hezbollah will likely be extremely cautious in deciding whether to participate in this war. The group's fate is linked to that of the embattled regime of Syrian President Bashar al Assad; should Syria fracture along sectarian lines, Lebanon is likely to descend into civil war, and Hezbollah will have to conserve its strength and resources for a battle at home against its sectarian rivals."

If Syria does fall, therefore, we can expect to see far more Israeli massacres of the type now currently under way. Not only will Syria be knocked out of the 'resistance axis' altogether, and Hezbollah left without a supply line from Iran, but Iran itself will be left isolated and less able to provide the Gazans with the missiles that currently provide their only effective deterrent to a renewed Israeli occupation.

This goes some way to explaining why the Israelis have been so supportive of the Syrian rebels, with Peres and Barak both throwing their weight behind the militias. Syria's support for Hezbollah, and the link it provides to Iran, has been a key obstacle to Israel's ability to attack the Palestinians with impunity, and therefore to its ability to unilaterally impose a final settlement on Palestine. For now, the main obstacle to Israeli diktat remains the Fajr-5.

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How Palestinian and Israeli firepower compare

JONATHAN MARCUS

THE upsurge of fighting between Israel and Hamas has highlighted, once again, the total disparity of force between the two sides.

Israeli aircraft and naval units can operate against targets in the Gaza Strip more or less at will.

If there were to be a major ground incursion by Israel something that both sides would probably want to avoid the military balance again would be overwhelmingly in Israel's favor.

Equally though, the fighting has highlighted the pervasive risk posed by the Palestinian rocket arsenal to Israeli citizens living in the southern part of the country.

Palestinian rockets may not be especially sophisticated or accurate.

Nonetheless, they remain a serious threat, as the

Israeli military spokesmen claim to have been remarkably successful in destroying them, though there are reports that at least one Fajr-5 has been fired during the current round of fighting.

Israel's response to the missile threat has been both defensive and offensive in nature. Its relatively new anti-missile system dubbed Iron Dome is heavily engaged in the current fighting. It has been operational since 2011.

Each of the four available batteries can defend an area the size of a medium-size town.

Powerful radars identify and track incoming missiles; their likely landing point is estimated and the battery then fires interceptor missiles at those determined to be heading for populated areas.

Ticking clock

Iron Dome appears to be working well in this crisis, but no defensive system can be 100 percent successful.

Israel has also sought to disrupt missile consignments heading to the Gaza Strip.

This is especially the case for the longer-range Iranian and Chinese-designed rockets, some of which, analysts believe, come by a complex smuggling network from Iran, to Sudan and then overland through Egypt and the Sinai Peninsula into the Gaza Strip.

The "mystery" air attack against a consignment of shipping containers outside an Iranian-operated arms factory in Sudan in late October is widely seen as having been carried out by the Israeli air force in an attempt to interrupt weapons supplies going to Hamas or other Palestinian groups.

Regular airstrikes in the Gaza Strip have targeted individual leaders of some of the smaller Palestinian factions, along with crews getting ready to launch rockets.

But this is the largest Israeli operation since its ground incursion into the northern Gaza Strip in 2008 and 2009.

Inevitably, for all the talk from Israeli spokesmen of "surgical strikes," Palestinian civilians have been killed.

Civilian casualties, of course, could rise dramatically if the Israelis move towards a ground offensive. All of the pressures point towards an escalation of the fighting before it dies down.

The outcome may well be another uneasy ceasefire that perhaps could last for some time.

That is clearly what the Israelis want out of this. But the basic dilemmas in the Gaza Strip remain unchanged.

There is no sign of any credible peace process. And, once this crisis ends, the clock may well be ticking towards the next eruption of violence.

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An Iron Dome launcher fires an interceptor rocket near Sderot.

direct hit on an apartment building in Kiryat Malachi on Thursday morning, which left three dead, demonstrated.

Israeli towns or cities in a broad arc south of Tel Aviv are all potentially within range of these rockets. Hundreds of thousands of Israelis live in their shadow; it is a situation that successive Israeli governments have struggled to deal with.

The Palestinian rocket arsenal is large and gradually improving over time. Many of the shorter-range systems, like the Qassam a generic name for a whole family of weapons are built in factories and workshops in the Gaza Strip itself. These have ranges up to a dozen or so kilometers.

Surgical strikes Grad missiles, many thought to be supplied by Iran, have a slightly longer reach up to about 20 kilometers though some upgraded versions may have a considerably longer range.

A Chinese-designed rocket, the WS-1E, has also been used against Israeli targets these have a range of around 40 kilometers.

The most potent weapons in the Palestinian arsenal are the Fajr-5 rockets. These have a potential range of up to 75 kilometers, threatening the fringes of Tel Aviv Israel's largest city.

Storage sites for these weapons have been among the specific targets sought out by Israeli aircraft.

Obama's re-engagement with Southeast Asia

THITINAN PONGSUDHIRAK

BARACK Obama's visit to Southeast Asia, which started on Sunday 18 November and is culminating with his attendance at the East Asia Summit in Cambodia, underscores America's stepped-up re-engagement in what is considered China's backyard.

Under Obama's watch, the United States has 'pivoted' or 'rebalanced' its foreign policy intentions and resources toward Asia for the 21st century. But domestic constraints and persistent problems in the Middle East, South Asia and elsewhere will hinder the United States' ability to manoeuvre in Asia. The rebalancing is a smart strategy, but America's resource constraints and geographical challenges will be its long-term spoiler.

The focus of the visit was mainland Southeast Asia, a sub-region that is pivotal to America's pivot. America, a sea power with vast continental resources, wants to reclaim its place in a different fashion than when it was last there, during the Indochina wars of the last century. China has always been present in Southeast Asia geo-strategically, their historical influence having spanned centuries. The states that make up the region have hedged between the two giants.

Obama's first stop was Bangkok. This is unsurprising, as Thailand is a friend of 180 years and was a treaty ally through the Cold War. He then headed to Yangon in symbolic support of Myanmar's reform momentum. His Yangon visit was designed to propel the democratic transition in what Obama's predecessor labelled an 'outpost of tyranny'. The Obama presence in Myanmar was the first step towards making up for years of sanctions, which placed the US government and private sector behind the curve, while China and Asean made deep inroads. Phnom Penh was the final stop, for the increasingly important strategic dialogue between the 18 members of the East Asia Summit.

Underpinning the Obama visit is the United States' relatively small but symbolically significant US\$50 million Lower Mekong Initiative, which aims to assist in infrastructure development and capacity building in mainland Southeast Asia. But despite this assistance, mainland Southeast Asia is increasingly leaning toward Beijing's orbit in a new formation that can be referred to as 'CLMT' Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Thailand.

A generation ago, the mainland half of ASEAN was known as the 'CLMV' 'V' being Vietnam. But the conflict in the South China Sea, where China's aggressive role is fiercely resisted and America's presence is warmly welcomed by the ASEAN maritime states, has set Hanoi apart. At the same time, Thai ties to China have warmed inexorably. For example, Thailand's position on the South China Sea has been that it is beyond the scope of ASEAN as a whole and should be settled bilaterally.

China and Vietnam have cooperated at the highest levels on trade, investment and diplomacy, but their rift in the South China Sea has trumped the bilateral

relationship. The Philippines is even more confrontational vis-à-vis Beijing, and has leaned on the United States for backing and reassurance. The same might be said of other nations wary of China's intentions in the contested seas, including Japan, Australia, Malaysia and Indonesia. Through a new system of bolstered treaty alliances and strategic partnerships, the United States' role and its maritime power is challenging Beijing's dominance in maritime Southeast Asia.

Moreover, the interests and concerns of the maritime Southeast Asian states are increasingly divergent from those of CLMT. CLMT were either silent or supportive of Cambodia's pro-China stance at the annual regional ministerial meeting in Phnom Penh in July 2012 (the meeting at which ASEAN failed to produce a joint statement due to the influence of the Philippines and Vietnam on including language on the South



China Sea disputes).

It appears that maritime Southeast Asia is increasingly leaning toward Washington, whereas mainland Southeast Asia is more influenced by Beijing.

Obama's presidential foray should not set out to antagonise Beijing. China and the United States have significant relations and strong commercial ties. China is America's largest creditor and America is China's largest export market. Such cooperation is preferable to open rivalry.

Regional discussions and meetings on peace and stability in Cambodia should thus focus on regional architecture. The discredited notion of a G2, whereby Beijing and Washington would together dictate regional outcomes, should be revisited up to a point. A working regional framework must rely on mutual understanding and accommodation. The ASEAN states have more to gain from partial implementation of the G2 than a complete rivalry between the two superpowers.

If China moderates its South China Sea claims and the United States reassures Beijing that its rebalancing toward Asia is benign, maritime and mainland ASEAN states would not be caught between the two superpowers. Southeast Asia could then be a source of security and stability for all of Asia.

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